Apprenticeship Teaching in England: New practices, roles and professional formation for educators

Bill Esmond

Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, University of Derby, Kedleston Road, Derby, UK DE22 1GB

Summary: Whilst apprenticeships are generally supported by workplace trainers and by vocational teachers in schools or colleges, competency-based systems also allocate roles to third-party workplace assessors. Apprenticeship reforms in England, replacing qualification-based 'frameworks' with 'employer-led standards' have opened up possibilities for these assessors to carry out training duties, although these generally lack the qualifications and status of classroom-based teachers, having completed shorter courses in assessment and sometimes training practice. A qualitative study was carried out among practitioners who had begun to take on training responsibilities, exploring their emerging practices and identities. Participant responses varied in their apprehension of role change, partly because apprentices in more technical subjects would continue to study at colleges, whilst practice-based subjects would be entirely taught in the workplace. More generally, working within production constraints provided challenges implying not a minimal professional formation but a more direct engagement with the problems of educational practice within production environments.

Keywords: assessors; workplace learning; teacher training

Introduction

Apprenticeships are facilitated by staff various roles, each with their own form of professional formation, across different national TVET systems. These range from teachers in schools, who have undergone substantial programmes of university-based training, to workplace trainers or coaches with minimal qualification levels. Neither these roles nor their formation are fixed: several countries have reduced or sought enhanced levels of certification; a more frequent expectation has been that school- or college-based teachers adapt their teaching to the expectations of industry (European Commission 2015; Hemkes and Schemme 2013; Ertl and Sloane 2004).

In competency-based systems such as those in Australia and the UK, an intermediary role is played by staff who assess the competence of apprentices in the workplace but are often employed by colleges or independent training providers. These assessors are expected to be 'occupationally competent', i.e. to possess the level of occupational expertise held by skilled workers, and to be certificated as assessors, following a short course and experience of assessment. They have not been regarded or trained as teachers (although some may teach in addition to their work as assessors).

In England changes to these roles are now emerging in the wake of the Richard Review (Richard 2012). This set the UK government on the path of replacing the

suites of qualifications that from 2002 had made up apprenticeship 'frameworks' to the introduction of apprenticeship 'standards'. These 'employer-led' apprenticeships have been designed by committees of employers and education specialists, varying significantly in content and complexity. They range from short statements of outcomes to continuing requirements for qualifications; whilst more higher-level apprenticeships have been approved, many lower-level apprenticeships now have less content, and no qualifications (Fuller and Unwin 2017). In a further significant change, the continuous assessment that has characterised work-based vocational qualifications since the 1980s has been replaced by a single assessment at the end of the apprenticeships, 'end-point assessment' (EPA) (Ofqual 2017).

The effect of these changes has been to eliminate much of the routine work of assessors. However, many of these staff have now been offered opportunities to take on apprenticeship training or teaching roles that prepare apprentices for meeting the standards at EPA. Because TVET teaching qualifications are no longer a legal requirement in England (Lingfield 2012), these practitioners are legally able to take on such responsibilities. This raises important questions about the possibilities and quality of their contribution to workplace training or teaching, particularly as they are often external to the placement firm, employed by colleges or private training providers.

A further question relates to the professional formation of these educators. Hitherto, where assessors have sought to move beyond assessors' qualifications, they have been directed towards short courses in training practice, such as the all-purpose Award in Education and Training, a short course with similarities to the Australian Certificate IV (City & Guilds 2014). These deal with the most basic essentials of pedagogic practice and have enabled some assessors to carry out basic training functions within the workplace in the past. However, the new standards opened up the possibility in at least some subjects of teaching the entire apprenticeship programme in the workplace, placing significantly greater pedagogic responsibilities on apprenticeship staff formerly designated as assessors. Recognition of these challenges emerged in a government overview of the proposed changes, with a pledge to 'support to ensure teachers' knowledge and skills reflect up-to-date occupational standards' (HM Government 2015, p.45). A prototype course for assessors moving into training roles was developed, trialled, evaluated, redesigned and underwent further trials between 2016 and 2018. This provided the background for the study reported here.

Methods and research design

The aim of the study was to examine how assessor/trainers' practice had changed with the adoption of new apprenticeship standards, in order then to determine what approaches should inform the professional formation of such practitioners. These two elements were integrated into the holistic question: What are the implications of new training roles and practices for VET educator professional formation in England?

The study was carried out through semi-structured interviews of assessors, or former assessors, who were moving into training roles (n=16). Participants were interviewed individually, in pairs, or small groups, based on occupational or cognate areas. Transcripts of the recordings were coded according to a scheme using concepts from the literature and thematically analysed, initially with attention to the relationship of their practices to notions of autonomy or professionalism widely used in research.

The initial categorisation of data was followed by systematic review of the data, searching for contrasts and irregularities, as well as themes, patterns and regularities (Delamont 1992). These were also compared with wider discussion of the roles of vocational educators and their preparation within different settings and national systems, drawing on the data and analysis of other researchers in this and related fields (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wellington 2000). Key findings based on this analysis are set out below.

Results

A key question for the study was whether changes in policy and job description really constituted a qualitative shift from earlier assessment practices. One participant caricatured the simplicity of continuous assessment: '"Can you do the criteria?" And then tick it off… and there's your qualification'. For some participants, their changing roles constituted a shift towards recognisable teacher identities and practices, particularly strongly evidenced among those providing education and early childhood qualifications. Others, however, described training practices which they had used in their long-term work as assessors, providing examples of how they worked with apprentices to explain how to improve their work. Not all participants welcomed the role change, which was sometimes discussed in terms of pressures to plan sessions, with additional workload and performative pressures. The latter anxieties also reflected a new precarity of apprenticeship work: apprenticeship numbers have fallen in England since the introduction of an employer levy. But the ambivalence about new training roles also reflected wider ambiguities about the status of vocational educators: even full-time classroom-based teachers have relatively low status in England, whilst the further education sector that mainly provides VET is staffed with high numbers of part-time, short-term employees who struggle to find permanent roles (Wheelahan 2012; Esmond and Wood 2017). In this environment, the accession of additional educators to teaching or training roles invites a level of suspicion among established and aspiring teachers in the sector. A lack of clarity about the new roles in policy is also apparent: the movement of assessors into training roles may be seen, particularly by some private training providers, as an opportunity to reduce costs rather than to enhance the expertise of existing staff.

This lack of clarity is also reflected in the wide variation among the emerging practices of trainers. Because the introduction of 'standards' has allocated the responsibility for apprenticeship design to 'trail-blazer groups', with a normative role for government agencies, the content of programmes varies significantly. In fields with greater technical content such as engineering, training staff described a marginal role, teaching 'behaviours… and their own personal progression and development' whilst technical aspects of the apprenticeship leading to qualifications were still to be taught in classroom settings. In practice-based fields such as hairdressing, students were able to meet the standards entirely on the basis of learning in the workplace and so former assessors were better placed to facilitate the whole of their learning programme. Yet participants in the latter settings often experienced poor access to learning environments, perhaps inevitably in the small businesses of these industrial sectors. More broadly, learning opportunities for apprentices were subject to greater tensions between learning and production requirements according to the status of occupations, with managers and high-status employees reportedly better able to secure time away from work.

These difficulties do not negate the possibility for assessors to make important contributions to work-based learning. They possess industry-wide expertise that firm-

based coaches or trainers accustomed to the approaches of one firm might not possess, providing additional dimensions to an apprenticeship. In a country where workplace knowledge and skills tend to be designated in policy discourse as 'the skills employers want', this offers advantages over single-firm-based approaches. This is particularly important where apprentices are to be trained substantially outside school or college environments.

However, such contributions require not only clarity of purpose but also a coherent process of professional development. The challenges facing workplace-based educators and the expertise they require are not less than those of classroom-based teachers: they are different. The minimal preparation that has served for assessors and workplace trainers in the past would be inadequate for external specialists of the type described here. A coherent specialist professional formation for these roles would need not only to address the general questions of pedagogic practice and its context that characterise teacher education in the VET sector. It would require to address the challenges of educational practice in workplace environments.

The research reported here was a small-scale study but even at this scale indicated significant variations in the experiences and approaches of this type of emerging work-based education professional. A more detailed study, using broader data in a greater variety of settings, will become more practicable as apprenticeship 'standards' and related training practices become more widely established. However, it is already possible on the basis of this study to appreciate both the possibilities and important challenges that are likely to characterise this emerging area of apprenticeship practice.

Literature

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